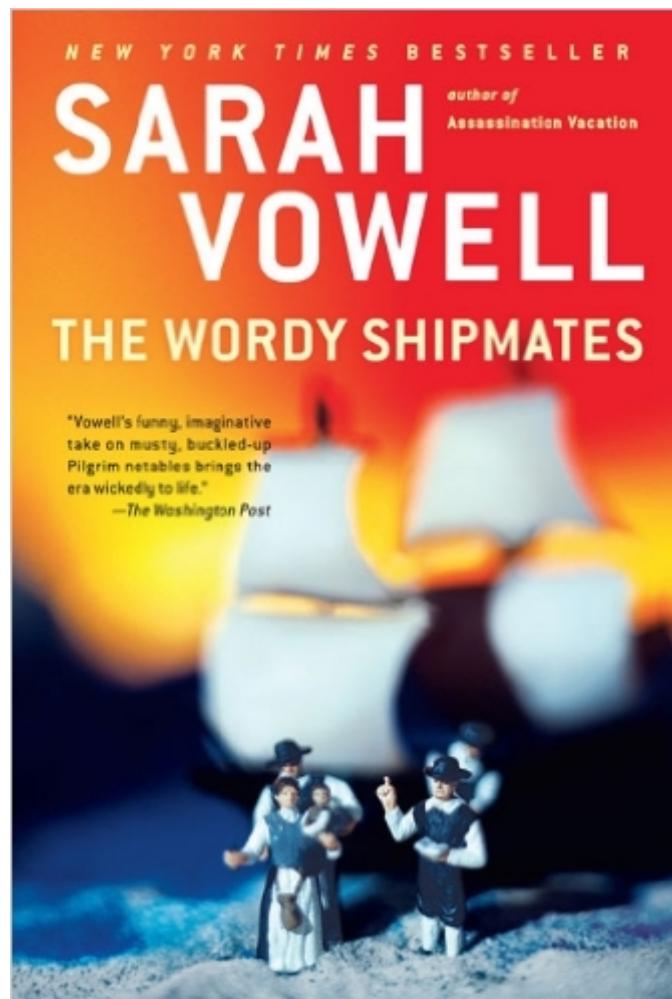


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# The Wordy Shipmates



## Synopsis

In this New York Times bestseller, the author of *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* "brings the [Puritan] era wickedly to life" (Washington Post). To this day, America views itself as a Puritan nation, but Sarah Vowell investigates what that means-and what it should mean. What she discovers is something far different from what their uptight shoebuckles- and-corn reputation might suggest-a highly literate, deeply principled, and surprisingly feisty people, whose story is filled with pamphlet feuds, witty courtroom dramas, and bloody vengeance. Vowell takes us from the modern-day reenactment of an Indian massacre to the Mohegan Sun casino, from old-timey Puritan poetry, where "righteousness" is rhymed with "wilderness," to a Mayflower-themed waterslide. Throughout, *The Wordy Shipmates* is rich in historical fact, humorous insight, and social commentary by one of America's most celebrated voices.

## Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Riverhead Books (October 6, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1594484007

ISBN-13: 978-1594484001

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.7 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 starsÂ  See all reviewsÂ  (268 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #61,797 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #124 inÂ  Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Great Britain #690 inÂ  Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local #761 inÂ  Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States

## Customer Reviews

There's nothing like a Sarah Vowell book to provide a new slant on a historical period. In "The Wordy Shipmates," she tackles a rather odd era, and one for which most people have definite opinions: the settlement of Massachusetts by the Puritans. Vowell does not reveal that the Puritans were \*not\* the American version of the Taliban. Certainly, they were fanatical, even by the standards of their own time, and harsh and guilt-ridden to boot. Their endless arguments about the meaning of biblical verses and their extreme hatred and fear of "Papists" put them two steps away from the loony bin. Yet they possessed attitudes (and paranoias) that put them squarely at the root of what would become the American nation character. Having arrived on these shores, by the grace

of God, they were ferociously jealous of their freedom from the intrigues and violent interference of the English court and church. Worried sick about takeover by their own government, they were careful to give at least the appearance of subservience to the powerful crown. Vowell's hero is John Winthrop, the first governor of the collection of rude shacks that became the city of Boston. Winthrop is an oxymoron -- a Puritan with a streak of practical morality -- who rules with a weird combination of Christian compassion and tyrannical ruthlessness. Over a fractious and easily offended populace, Winthrop bobs and weaves like a prize fighter, somehow managing to keep his society from fragmenting. Winthrop nearly meets his match with Roger Williams though. Williams, far from being the free-speech champion that we liberals thought him to be, is even more of a Puritan than the Puritans.

Upon reading this book, I struggled for a few days on how many stars to give this. At times, I really liked Vowell's very personal-essay-like history of the Pilgrims at the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Vowell is very knowledgeable and, at times, is a very good and passionate writer. At times, however, I was also either bored by redundancy, waiting for a seemingly episodic collection of essays to "come together" and read like a book, or annoyed by Vowell's constant employment of sarcasm. Alas, I chose to give this book 3 of 5 stars. I figure that the best way to explain is to go through a list of pros and cons.

PROS: \_\_\_\_\_ Vowell's book on the Pilgrims is obviously a very personal one, and her enthusiasm and passion for the subject shows very well. She recounts not only the tortuous adventure the Pilgrims took from Britain to America and their struggle to build a city, but also tours she has been on, journals she has pored through, and what the Pilgrims mean to her. The Wordy Shipmates works best - works quite well - when it is read as a collection of themed essays, rather than a flowing book. Once I began to read it in this way, I was better able to admire Vowell's frequent and lengthy asides (where an essay on x quickly becomes an essay on y). Each essay explores some facet about the Pilgrims - their religiosity, their caring nature, their admiration of hard work - but each essay stands on its own more than connects with other essays.

CONS: \_\_\_\_\_ As something of a collection of essays, Vowell can be (quite) redundant.

The point Sarah Vowell hopes to make with her book is condensed in its three opening sentences: "The only thing more dangerous than an idea is a belief. And by dangerous I don't mean thought-provoking. I mean: might get people killed." In many ways the book aims to be a modern social commentary that tells us about all the terrible things that happened to and in the United

States and the world because some Puritans hopped on a boat and came here. We elected Bush? That's Anne Hutchinson's fault. And not just because Bush is a descendant of hers either. Had it not been for Anne's ideas, most American Protestants would not now believe in "immediate personal revelation" (p. 209)--the idea (radical at the time) that individuals have a personal relationship with God and that, as a result, only the individual is responsible for his or her own salvation. In other words, had it not been for Anne, there would have been no born-again Christians and, hence, no George Bush. Our (often disastrous) interventions around the world? Blame Winthrop of "City on a Hill" fame. Had he not drummed into us that we're a city on a hill, a model to the world, we might be less eager to spread our model from one corner of the globe to the next. And, in any event, we might not have had Ronald Reagan as president. (I suspect Sarah Vowell might be a Democrat by the way.) The Indian massacres? That too is the Puritans' fault. But here Sarah Vowell does not have to rely on genealogy or one man or woman's belief system to prove her point. The Puritans, after all, massacred many Indians. Like the Pequot, whose children, women, and men they literally burned alive. This book is thus worth reading if all you want are the details of what happened after Thanksgiving.

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The Wordy Shipmates

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